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ABSTRACT

Subsequent to emphasizing the importance of historical case studies for gaining a fuller understanding of curriculum history, the paper discusses problems associated with historical case study research. Their analysis stresses the importance of scholars focusing on common research questions and utilizing similar methodology. Such cooperation is viewed as a necessary prelude to producing similar case studies from several school districts. The data from such studies would provide a useful basis for hypotheses regarding the process by which curriculum changes are made in large urban school districts. (Author)

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Focusing Case Study Research: Can We
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The allegedly ahistorical posture of educators and curriculum scholars has been documented with some regularity (Bellack, 1969, Tanner, 1983). Despite this indictment there has been extensive research activity in historical educational research in recent years. For example, while the works of Karier, Violas, Spring and Greer were not specifically concerned with curriculum matters, their work and reaction to it (Ravitch, 1977) has focused attention on research relating to the history of education.

Kliebard and Franklin (1983) have maintained that case studies of curriculum change and stability would help educators gain an important perspective on curriculum history. However, while they cite several case studies, they conclude that the the researchers/historians have not satisfactorily examined the arena of the school curriculum and that our knowledge of "curriculum practice in the schools themselves is woefully sketchy" (Kliebard and Franklin, p. 148). These authors advocate more case study research at the same time noting the "considerable difficulties" which case studies pose for researchers.

While recognizing the conceptual and methodological pitfalls associated with historical case studies, the authors of this paper contend that historical case study research can provide valuable insights for contemporary problems, thus the concern for the most appropriate and effective strategies for carrying out historical case studies. This paper

focuses on some of the issues and strategies which should be considered by scholars interested in studying curriculum history via historical case studies. The intent is to promote efforts in historical case study research.

The contention is that a major barrier in carrying out historical case study research is conceptualized as a failure among scholars to communicate regarding (1) the important questions to be asked, and (2) the failure to use common methods to answer similar research questions. Our goal is to foster dialogue among curriculum scholars concerning the issues and strategies for conducting historical case studies and ultimately some coordinated efforts among curriculum scholars who are doing historical research in the field.

Facilitating Common Focus Through Emphasis on Common Questions

Connelly (1978) in an essay in Case Studies in Curriculum Change (Reid and Walker, 1975) discusses the problem of uncoordinated case studies at some length. He has concluded that a lack of focus caused an otherwise interesting collection of studies to become a relatively aimless and incoherent collection of facts. A similar critique might be made of other historical case study research which is rich in fact and insight but scattered over so many areas that it is difficult to discern similar themes amid the unrelated efforts. As pointed out by Connelly (1978), such disparate research only has meaning when a particular idea or question is at stake. Similarly, Tanner (1982) has counseled that "there is danger in looking to history for ideas when the search is not guided by the need to obtain an accurate and full picture of a contemporary problem?" (p. 407).

There is no dearth of possible questions. From our perspective, some of the key questions for focusing future historical case studies at the local level are:

- 1) How were similar curriculum reforms translated into curriculum policy in different local districts;
- 2) How has the process of curriculum change remained stable or fluctuated in various districts;
- 3) Who participates in curriculum changes; and,
- 4) What effect does the process by which changes are made have on the substance of the local curriculum?

A first step toward focusing case study research is for researchers to decide that these or other questions are worthy of concentrated, coordinated research. Although stating this goal is relatively simple, implementation of such cooperative and coordinated effort presents many problems. The interests and purposes of scholars differ considerably. Also, factors such as the availability of data certainly influence research decisions and practices. It is suggested that an important aspect of focusing historical research is for scholars to utilize national meetings and publications to cooperatively develop strategies regarding an identified set of research questions to be examined in their own future research and that conducted under their supervision by graduate students. Such sharing is deemed a critical first step in focusing research efforts.

Toward Hypothesis and Theorizing

Dialogue regarding research questions would assume added significance, purpose, and direction if carried on with the objective of using historical case study findings to hypothesize and theorize regarding basic questions. Historical case studies have been criticized as lengthy narratives with

no predictable or describable structure. However, building research in respect to major questions could ease this problem considerably (Yin, 1981).

Using historical case studies as part of a process of theorizing is another step toward focusing case study research. For example, based on a study of curriculum and stability in Milwaukee (Baruch, 1982), we might conclude that curriculum proposals which come from non-professional sources tend to be the object of a process of curriculum formation marked by political interaction among many internal and external factors while proposals of the professional staff are generally accepted with minimal political activity. A series of case studies similar to Baruch's would allow historians to refute, buttress or revise this hypothesis. As discussion of this and other hypotheses continued, scholars might utilize case studies to move toward theoretical study of influences on educational practice.

Methodological Considerations

Dialogue is also needed to examine and, hopefully, overcome methodological problems. Prominent among these are questions regarding the use of quantitative data, doing oral history, and appropriate written sources of information.

There has been great debate about the distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research. In recent years the realization has grown that most research is a blend of quantitative and qualitative approaches (Miles and Huberman, 1984). The question is not "Can case studies utilize quantitative data?" but rather, "Which data, and how?" For instance, it could be hypothesized that community influence on the process of curriculum formation might be measured by counting the number of curriculum change

proposals made and/or implemented at the instigation of non-professionals. The barriers to gathering and utilizing such data are not in finding the data but rather in convincing a number of researchers to see the collection of such data as an important task. Given such agreement, there is no inherent barrier to utilizing quantitative data gathered in the course of qualitative research.

Oral history is another methodological area which can be profitably used if researchers can agree on similar approaches. The nature of interviewing is such that differing interviewing styles and differing responses of interviewees will inevitably lead to variation in approach and results. Moreover, memories fade and recollections may differ from written documentation of the period under consideration. If there are no living witnesses willing or able to corroborate testimony, or if interviewees disagree, how can researchers utilize oral evidence? Certainly the accepted rules of analyzing written sources help us deal with some of these issues. Nevertheless, there are unique problems raised by interview data. Dialogue among researchers focusing on these problems might lead to operationally defining methodological approaches so as to assure that oral history data is worth considering.

Variations in the format and availability of written evidence present another potential problem area. For instance, Baruch (1982) used curriculum proposals made to the Board of School Directors as an object of analysis. Given conceptual agreement regarding definitions of curriculum, it would still be necessary to study school districts which had data regarding curriculum proposals within their school board records. If not, cooperating

scholars would have to make sure that similar data was available in a comparable form in all sites included in the sample.

Reasoning Together

Historical case studies are generally considered a source of rich data, but are not viewed as good vehicles for generalization. However, our contention is that there is tremendous potential in historical case study as a research approach. While a single case study may not be an appropriate basis for generalization, several case studies focusing on the same questions, utilized as part of a hypothesizing and theorizing process, and employing similar methodology could be significant sources of information --an increased possibility for generalization. The main barriers to such coordinated case studies are communication and cooperation. Researchers must come together to agree on the importance of common questions and study them cooperatively utilizing case studies for providing the information needed to hypothesize and build theories about the process of curriculum formation. Case study research can be focused if enough researchers take part in the dialogue necessary to reason together and forge a common ground.

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